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Sinai's Proud Moment



Robert Tell

ABOVE:
A block of
Pingree Street
burning out of
control, 1967.

In 1967, I was a 30-year-old senior executive at Sinai Hospital of Detroit, having moved here from New York in 1964 to take the position. I was on call that weekend. The chief operating officers were home and off duty and could not come in once the violence started. So I was in total charge of the hospital. Little did they know or I know what was coming.

The nursing supervisor called me at home and said I had better come in; something was going on. “What?” I asked. “Just come in quickly,” she said, “and meet me on the roof of the hospital.”

So I did. We gazed toward Downtown and the sky was lit up with flames. It looked like the result of a wartime bombing campaign, but we still had no idea what was happening.

We found out very soon from the police, and the hospital was in chaos. Sinai had a large African American employee staff from the inner city. Suddenly, they couldn't go home. Worse, replacement staff for the shift change couldn't come in.

People were tired and frightened. Tempers were growing short. And who would take care of our patients (who also could not go home, even if they were ready for discharge)? Many doctors could not come in either.

And there I was, suddenly responsible

for the fate of the entire hospital and its staff and patients. But I needn't have feared. I wasn't alone. The hospital staff pulled together as a team like never before to support me. Nothing was too much to ask to provide needed care for our sick charges.

Buses were rented to ferry staff back and forth through the danger zones, dodging sniper bullets all the way. Employees, many of whom were African American, risked life and limb to come in, relieve exhausted colleagues and make sure the patients were properly cared for.

Noisy helicopters flew overhead. Military weaponry and paraphernalia surrounded the hospital and permeated the city. The sounds of battle could be heard constantly as our staff tried to maintain a calm demeanor for the patients. It wasn't easy. It was like a siege and nerves were becoming very rattled.

Because of the curfew, many of us did not go home for days, sleeping wherever an unoccupied bed or sofa could be found. And, thanks to the loyalty and compassion of our employees — and regardless of what was going on in the city — the hospital weathered the storm and neither patients nor staff were among the casualties of the riot. It was a very proud moment for Sinai. ➤

NOTE: This is Robert Tell's poem, originally published in the JN in 2002. We thought we'd print it again.

DETROIT, 1967

Seen from the hospital rooftop, the cityscape blazed orange with hot flames.

From left to right and up and down the whole horizon flickers, and licked the gray and clouded ceiling of the sky, its heat too distant to relieve the chill felt by the stunned observer who shivered with both fear and fascination.

From this high spot, as though observed by some great bird, nested aloft and safe in forest trees, squinting at the conflagration down below, hazy lifeforms could be dimly seen scattered like buckshot.

Bullets whistled past (or into) treasure hunter heads and bodies, captured by the frenzy of the moment. Danger and the novelty of curfew could not dissuade them from their greedy quests.

Noisily overhead, the throaty throb of army helicopter blades, like monster ceiling fans, beat the air into the pulsing wind. Green tanks lumbered clumsily upon the city streets, their phallic cannons panned the avenues, and dared the foolish to a challenge.

The thwack of sniper slugs shattering shatterproof window glass in buses under siege brought workers to their knees where they crouched and prayed for safety.

Yet it came. Risking everything while the city burned. Amidst the looting and the maiming, the fighting and the killing, the caregivers came, refusing to abandon their sick charges trapped within the sphere of chaos.

With the daylight, when the fever and the fire both had cooled, when the whirlbirds were hangared and the tanks again garaged, some looked around with shame at what they'd wrought upon their own; while others, without bluster or apology, hugged their grateful patients and went home.